

OBITUARY

Murray Bowles — top photographer of punk rock scene

By Sam Whiting

Down in front of the stage at punk rock concerts, photographer Murray Bowles had a few rules for survival: Never look through the viewfinder (the camera could smash into his eye in a slam dance) and never wear a camera strap (a stage diver could get caught in it).

Bowles found that the only way to work in a mosh pit was to hold his camera high overhead with his right arm and snap the shutter, while using his left to fend off the blows. Then he hoped for the best, and he usually got it.

Over a long and bruising career, Bowles became a prominent photographer in the East Bay punk scene. His own image — with goatee, glasses and right arm holding the camera high — even made the cover montage illustration for "Dookie," Green Day's 1994 breakthrough album.

Bowles died Sunday at home in Sacramento, said his sister, Kathy Starr of Lodi. No cause of death was given, but Bowles had been having heart problems, she said. He was 68.

"Every East Bay band that came out with an album used photographs by Murray on the front or back cover," said Corbett Redford, producer and director of the 2017 documentary film "Turn it Around: The Story of East Bay Punk."

That story is centered

at 924 Gilman, the downtown Berkeley venue where punk anchored after migrating from San Francisco. Bowles seemed to be at 924 Gilman for every show, commuting from Santa Clara where he led a separate life as a computer programmer who played viola in the Peninsula Symphony.

He was quiet and older than everyone in the mosh pit and was never "punked out" with drastic head shavings or piercings. Band T-shirts were as punk as Bowles got, but he was accepted and shot concerts at 924 Gilman the way Jim Marshall shot shows at Winterland. He shot it as if he owned the place.

"His massive body of work and impact it had on myself and others is just staggering. RIP Murray and thank you," wrote Green Day front man Billie Joe Armstrong in a post on Instagram.

Murray Charles Bowles was born Oct. 22, 1951, in San Gabriel (Los Angeles County), where he grew up playing the viola in youth orchestras. After graduating from San Gabriel High School in 1969, he enrolled in Harvey Mudd College in Pomona, but transferred to UC San Diego to earn his bachelor's degree in information and computer science. He went on to earn a master's in computer science at UC Berkeley in 1976.

Bowles then took a job as a software engineer in San Jose, rented



Murray Bowles Archive 1990

Murray Bowles, constantly at 924 Gilman, also had a day job in the South Bay.

an apartment in Santa Clara and joined the Peninsula Symphony as a violist.

At the time, the punk scene was just starting and Bowles was attracted to it in a way he never outgrew. When the shows migrated to backyards and basements in Oakland and on down to San Jose, he followed them.

"He was an all-time fan, never jaded, never critical," Martin Sprouse, who worked at the punk journal Maximum Rocknroll, said in a 2010 interview. "He was at every punk show. It could be 15 sweaty kids in a garage and he would be there with his camera and everybody would know him."

Bowles published his images in the journal also known as MRR, and there were enough of them that the magazine put out a soft cover photo zine of Bowles' images in 1987. Titled "If Life Is a Bowl of Cherries, What Am I Doing in the Pit," it was his only set of published

work, other than images on album covers.

"He didn't just document bands on stage. He shot the crowds and the culture, everything," said Sprouse.

The one aspect of punk Bowles did not like to document was the excessive fighting and drinking, either of which often left its participants on the floor vomiting. Instead, he'd photograph the participants picking each other up off the floor.

"Sometimes the bands were good. Always the people were fun," Bowles told Maximum Rocknroll in a 2010 interview. "There was this real public perception of punk violence, moshing, and danger. It's nice to show it can be both ways."

After a show, he'd print his images in his Santa Clara kitchen, then bring them to 924 Gilman, where he would stand outside the front door and sell them for a quarter a print.

"They were always really beautiful and

positive. He had the most affectionate eye toward all of it," said Anna Brown, a high school English teacher who was 14 when she first met Bowles.

In the film "Turn it Around," Bowles was one of the few nonmusicians who merited a segment. He allowed the filmmakers access to his archive, which was digitized by Green Day, producers of the documentary.

"His presence is felt throughout the entire film," said Redford. "We would not have had a documentary without Murray Bowles."

Five years ago, Bowles started working on a book of his photos with Brown. It was slow going because even after digitizing, he still had boxes and boxes of unsorted prints and negatives.

Bowles and Brown finally got it done, selecting all of the images and choosing the title, "Chronicles of the Lost: The Photographs of Murray Bowles, 1983 to 1993." It was planned as

volume one.

In 2017, Bowles retired as a senior engineer at Dell Computer and also retired from the Peninsula Symphony, where he received a certificate of merit for his 40 years there. He sold his San Jose condo and bought a house in Sacramento to be closer to family in the Central Valley. He started photographing the small punk scene in Sacramento, while also commuting to concerts in the East Bay.

"Just a couple of months ago, he was documenting backyard shows by bands I've never heard of," said Mark Murrmann, former photo editor for Maximum Rocknroll. "What made him great is that he was really humble and dedicated."

Brown is determined to ensure "Chronicles of the Lost" will be published, so that Bowles' five years of work will not be in vain.

"I'm just super sad that he is not going to be there to sign them," Brown said. "Murray is our treasure."

Bowles was never married. Survivors include his mother, Ellen Bowles; sister Kathy Starr; niece Jennifer Starr; nephew Keith Starr; and great-nephew Sebastian Starr. A celebration of life will be held in the coming months.

In the meantime, 924 Gilman plans to create a memorial wall in Bowles' honor. To share photos with the club, email gretchen@924gilman.org.

Sam Whiting is a San Francisco Chronicle staff writer. Email: swhiting@sfcnchronicle.com Instagram: sfchronicle_art